Narratives of care leavers: What promotes resilience in transitions to independent lives?

Tehila Refaeli*

Spitzer Department of Social Work, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel

1. Introduction

Social changes over the last decade have altered the duration and timing of young people's transition to adulthood, extending and delaying it so that today they do not achieve independence until many years after adolescence. Arnett (2000) conceptualized this new developmental period as "emerging adulthood", which he defined as applying to the age range of 18 to 25. Indeed, in marked contrast to the accepted norms of the past, many of today's young people remain dependent on their parents' financial, concrete, and emotional support throughout their 20s, years in one's life that are devoted to the formation of identity and to making decisions about the future and during which young people explore their options (Marcia & Archer, 1993; Stein, 2006).

For certain groups in society, particularly young people who grew up in out-of-home placement due to abuse or neglect by their parents, the period of "emerging adulthood" entails some unique challenges. For example, in many countries, the period of care ends at around 18 years of age, at which time young people must leave the out-of-home care. During the after-care period most of these young care leavers benefit from only limited assistance (Arnett, 2007), as the support networks they had while in care are no longer available to them. Although in recent years, more services are available to support care leavers after leaving care, they do not address the multiple and varied needs of care leavers, among whom the utilization of rights and services is low (Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013; Stott, 2013). Therefore, concerned mainly with providing for their own immediate and essential needs, care leavers typically have fewer options open to them to explore and from which to choose a future (Arnett, 2007; Stein, 2006; Wade, 2008). Against this backdrop, this article examines, from the perspective of care leavers, the challenges that they encountered during their transitions to adulthood and independent life.

1.1. After care challenges

Studies from around the world indicate that a large number of care leavers fail to successfully perform independent life tasks. This group of young people is characterized by high rates of housing instability and homelessness (Courtney et al., 2011; Perez & Romo, 2011). Moreover, a large percentage of care leavers must cope with unemployment, or they work for low pay (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Dixon, Wade, Byford, Weatherly, & Lee, 2006). As a result, many of them live in conditions of poverty and economic distress (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Pecora et al., 2006). In addition, compared to their peers in the general population, care leavers also exhibit higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency and imprisonment, and they tend to use mental health services more frequently (Cusick, Havlicek, & Courtney, 2012; Schiff & Benbenishty, 2006; Shook et al., 2011). While previous studies mainly focused on measuring the objective achievements of care leavers, the current study examines care leavers' post-care experiences from their own perspectives.

1.2. Explaining adjustment after care based on resilience theory

In recent years, rather than perpetuate convention by studying the negative factors that contribute to the risk behaviors and maladjustment found among care leavers, scholars began to focus on the importance of identifying and examining the drivers that help care leavers cope with the transition to adulthood and independence (see for example, Stein, 2006, 2008; Yates & Grey, 2012). Notably, the analysis of these factors from the perspective of resilience theory can promote the development of social interventions among at-risk youth.

Indeed, resilience theory can be exploited to help identify and assess the principal determinants of coping behaviors among care leavers who are confronted with the challenges of emerging adulthood. Resilience is defined as the ability to adapt and to function well despite experiences of distress and adversity (Burt & Paysnick, 2012; Masten, 1994, 2004; Rutter, 1987). As such, people who show resilience can respond effectively to the crises or sources of distress in their lives and exhibit effective strategies for coping with these situations (Bandura, 1997; Kobasa, 1979; Wu et al., 2013). Whereas some researchers view resilience as a dynamic process that leads to positive results, others describe resilience according to people's behavior or achievements in the wake of traumatic experiences (Jacelon, 1997; Masten & Powell, 2003; O'Connor et al., 2016). Stein (2006) categorized care leavers into three groups defined by level of resilience. Care leavers classified with

* Spitzer Department of Social Work, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, POB 653, Beer-Sheva 8410501, Israel
  E-mail address: tehilare@bgu.ac.il.

high resilience, which Stein called the "moving on" group, attained developmental achievements similar to those achieved by youth who were raised by their biological parents. In contrast, both of the other two groups – "survivors" and "victims" – had to negotiate a variety of obstacles as they attempted to adjust to independent life.

Among the resources that can promote resilience among people who experienced situations of risk and distress are what researchers call protective factors (Schoon, 2006). Rather than protecting people from risk or from the traumatic events themselves, protective factors facilitate coping during or after the traumatic event (Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1990). In the literature, protective factors are broadly divided into the three categories of personal resources, support from family, and support from significant others (Schoon, 2006). To promote resilience, however, it is not known whether all three types of protective factors are required in concert or whether the presence of elements from a single category is sufficient. The current study explored this question by analyzing the stories of care leavers who were transitioning from military service to independent life. The following sections provide descriptions of, and review the findings of previous research related to, the three types of protective factors.

1.2.1. Personal resources

Resilience theory highlights the important role that personal resources such as mastery, self-efficacy, and self-esteem play in promoting positive coping in spite of difficulties and distress one experienced in childhood (Jacelon, 1997; Stein, 2008; Werner, 1990). The ability to cope positively with adversity can be explained by the mechanism activated by one's personal resources – they enhance the belief in one's strength and ability to deal with future challenges in life despite the hardships encountered in the past (Dumont & Provost, 1999). However, only a few studies have examined the extent to which personal resources help facilitate the transition of care leavers to independent life. Existing studies have revealed that self-esteem, optimism, and self-efficacy contribute positively to the adjustment of care leavers in life domains such as housing and employment (Barn & Tan, 2012; Merdinger et al., 2005; Sulimani-Aidan, Benbenishty, Dinisman, & Zeira, 2013). The current study used the life stories of care leavers to examine the role that personal resources play in the transition process.

1.2.2. Support resources for care leavers

1.2.2.1. Family support. Support, a key factor in helping people handle abuse, neglect, and stress (Driscoll, 2013; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003), can originate from a variety of sources, including family members, peers, and social services. A review of the research on youth leaving foster care revealed that many care leavers return to live with their biological parents or extended family members (Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008). Another review indicated that care leavers often maintain relationships with their biological mothers and siblings (Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013). Although resilience theory has highlighted the important protective role that support from parents and family can fulfill, for care leavers, the impact of their relationship with their biological family members is not straightforward. Studies of the effects that maintaining their relationships with their biological families can have on care leavers have generated mixed findings (Driscoll, 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Schiff & Benbenishty, 2006; Wade, 2008), indicating that such family relationships may contribute positively, negatively or not at all to the efforts of care leavers to begin their independent lives. Cashmore and Paxman (2007), for example, highlighted the incidence of abuse experienced by care leavers at the hands of their family members. It is therefore important to carefully explore and elucidate the circumstances under which the family relationships of care leavers will promote their resilience.

1.2.2.2. Support from significant others. Few studies on care leavers have examined the positive role that one's peers can fulfill in promoting resilience during the transition from care to independent life (Hiles et al., 2013; Perez & Romo, 2011; Snow & Mann-Feder, 2013). A literature review by Hiles et al. (2013) pointed out the obstacles experienced by care leavers when they attempt to make new friends. Notably, they are wary of trusting others due to the abusive nature of their primary relationships with their parents. Moreover, they must endure the stigma of being children who grew up in care.

The academic neglect of the potential support that peers can offer care leavers is matched by the dearth of research on the role of mentors, i.e., adults who are not the biological or foster parents of care leavers (Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracy, 2010; Pinkerton, 2011). The findings of previous research indicate that care leavers who receive support from peers and mentors not only engage in less risky behavior, they also have a better chance of enrolling in, and a subsequently lower tendency to drop out of, higher education institutions (Martin & Jackson, 2002; Merdinger et al., 2005; Munson et al., 2010). The existing research, however, has not explored how and the extent to which support from non-family individuals help care leavers during the transition to adulthood and independence.

1.3. The Israeli context

The current study focuses on care leavers in Israel. While many of the findings in the literature can be generalized to multiple cultural contexts, it is important to note that, independent of culture, the experiences of care leavers may also vary across the different child welfare systems. In Israel, as in other countries, formal out-of-home placement ends at age 18 (Stein & Munro, 2008). However, two characteristics of leaving care in Israel should be mentioned. First, Israel has few services and no legislation to support care leavers (Benbenishty, 2015). By comparison, countries such as the UK and the US have comprehensive legislation, provide nets of services and allocate funds specifically for this population (Stein & Munro, 2008).

The other contextual issue is compulsory military service in Israel, which dictates that every Jewish citizen be drafted into the army at the age of 18 for periods of two years for women and three years for men. Insofar as military service in Israel provides young people with opportunities such as learning how to work as part of a team and taking responsibility for themselves and others, it is generally perceived by scholars as promoting maturity and accelerating the transition to adulthood (Dar & Kimhi, 2001, 2004; Mayseless, 2004). Perceptions notwithstanding, however, research with an appropriate methodology to support this notion is lacking.

For most care leavers in Israel, their army service marks the beginning of their transition to independence. Indeed, it is usually the first time that no adults are in charge of them and that they have to take care of themselves (e.g., doing their own laundry, making appointments with doctors, managing a bank account). However, because the army provides all of its soldiers with food and shelter and some of its soldiers, such as those without family support, with special monetary allowances, their compulsory military service may also relieve young people of the need to assume full responsibility for their lives. Care leavers in Israel, therefore, may negotiate the main challenge of transition from care only after they complete their military service.

1.4. Aims of the study

The study explored care leavers' experiences of the transition from care to independent life, with a focus on their transition from military service to complete independence, from their own perspectives. In addition, it sought to identify patterns and characteristics in the stories that can be used to differentiate between the young people in terms of their resilience.